

ARRESTS - PRISONERS

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CIVIL WAR

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# The Civil War

## Arrests, Prisons, and Prisoners

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

# The Civil War Comes to Our Doorstep

By Curt Haseltine

Free Press Marine Writer

**D**ID you ever hear of the Confederate Navy that sailed out of Detroit a century ago—and came within an ace of changing the entire course of the Civil War?

It is one of the most fantastic tales to come out of the war—and it marked the nearest thing to armed combat that occurred around these parts.

It all began with the War Department decision to set up a prison camp on one of the many islands that dot the western end of Lake Erie.

A SITE was chosen on sheltered Johnson's Island, nestled in the encircling arms of Sandusky Bay. It was available at only \$500 a year, there was a 40-acre clearing suitable for the camp itself, there was plenty of available timber for fuel and it was only 2½ miles off Sandusky.

The island quickly became "host" to the cream of war prisoners, Confederate officers whose escape would be most damaging to the North. Although designed for 1,000 prisoners, the population rose at times to as many as 3,000 . . . and about 2,500 was considered "normal."

Despite this, Johnson's Island was one of the better prisons. The captured officers were housed in wooden barracks and fed the same fare given enlisted men in the Union Army.

**BUT DESPITE** their relatively mild imprisonment, the Confederates spent much of their leisure time concocting elaborate escape plans.

To guard against any such escape, the Union placed the gunboat Michigan on guard duty at Johnson's Island. The Navy's first iron ship, she was also the only United States vessel on the Great Lakes carrying cannon.

Her assignment to Johnson's

Island sparked a grand and fantastic Confederate plan.

If the high-ranking Confederate officers on Johnson's Island could be freed and the Michigan captured simultaneously, the gunboat could be used to range the Great Lakes, shelling the large cities along their shores and halting all Great Lakes commerce.

This would cut off the vital flow of Lake Superior copper and iron which enabled Union arsenals to turn out the "hardware" of war.

The freed prisoners, meanwhile, would capture a train at Sandusky and race to Columbus, O., to free the 5,000 prisoners held at Camp Chase there.

Their combined forces would form an Army to slash through the heart of the North, forcing Grant to divert some of his strength northward to meet them. This action would relieve the hard-pressed Army of Virginia.

**THE CONSPIRACY** was carefully planned.

A once-captured and paroled Confederate captain, Charles H. Cole, was sent to Sandusky to engineer the plot. His "cover" identity was that of a representative of the "Mount Hope Oil Company of Titusville, Pa."

Another Confederate agent, Annie Davis, assisted Cole in establishing social relationships with the officers of the gunboat. They were enter-

tained in Cole's home and Cole was entertained aboard.

He was so successful that he was taken on a tour of the Great Lakes aboard the Michigan and was able to make first-hand reports to the Confederate Government on the defenses of the major ports.

He was also permitted to mingle with the prisoners on Johnson's Island and was able to make contact with members of the Southern Cross, an organization of prisoners designed to make an escape attempt.

**WITH THIS** groundwork accomplished, the conspiracy moved quickly ahead.

A wealthy young Virginian, Capt. John Yates Beall, was placed in charge of a group detailed to steal a steamboat and put a boarding party on the Michigan. Cole was to entertain the officers at a champagne party, drug their wine and then hoist a signal to Beall.

Beall chose as the vehicle for the raid the steamer Philo Parsons, which operated between Detroit and Sandusky, with stops at Sandwich and Malden on the Canadian shore, and among the Lake Erie islands.

The day chosen for the attempt was Sept. 19, 1864. Some sources say Cole chose this date because he knew the Michigan's engines would be torn down then for routine overhaul. Others say Cole managed to sabotage the Michigan's engines.

**THE PHILO PARSONS** left her Detroit dock on schedule at 8 a.m. that day. She stopped at Sandwich and four passengers came aboard. Twenty more boarded her at Malden, bringing with them a trunk bound securely with rope.

At Middle Bass Island, Capt. S. F. Atwood, who made his home there, got off, as usual,

leaving his mate, Mitchell Campbell, in command for the rest of the run to Sandusky.

The Parsons then made her stop at Kelleys Island and continued on. When about two miles off the island, the roughly-dressed passengers threw open the trunk and pulled guns, knives and axes out of it.

Four of them burst into the pilothouse and seized the wheel. Another held the clerk, W. O. Ashley, at gunpoint. Still others herded male passengers into the hold and locked the women and children into the women's quarters.

Campbell was ordered to head the Parsons down the lake for about an hour because it was far too early to approach the Michigan; Cole would not have started his champagne party yet. When the engineer reported fuel was running low, Beall ordered Campbell to take the Parsons back to Put-in-Bay to load wood.

**AT THE DOCK** another island steamer drew alongside. She was the tiny Island Queen.

Numbered among her passengers were about 35 members of Company K, 130th Ohio National Guard. They had served their 100-day enlistments and were en route to Toledo to be mustered out. All were unarmed.

There wasn't enough room at the dock for both boats, so the Island Queen tied up alongside the Parsons.

No sooner were the lines made fast than the Confederates leaped aboard the Island Queen. Several shots were fired. The astonished soldiers had no chance to fight back.

The Island Queen's engineer, Henry Hanes, refused to come out of his engine room and was shot in the face. He was the only casualty of the affair.



The passengers from both boats, including the soldiers, were put ashore under pledge they would sound no alarm for 24 hours. The Parsons finished loading fuel and, with the Island Queen lashed alongside, headed out into the lake at sunset.

The smaller vessel impeded progress, so her feed pipe was cut and she was set adrift to sink. Fortunately the spot chosen was over Chicagola Reef, where she settled in only 10 feet of water and was readily salvaged.

\* \* \*

**THE PARSONS** laid her course for Johnson's Island and her rendezvous with Cole aboard the Michigan. Beall approached carefully. There was no activity on the island. There were lights from the Michigan but not the signals Cole was to have raised.

Beall waited. Still no signal. Finally he decided to attempt to take the Michigan regardless of Cole.

Campbell warned him of shoal waters in the area and the men, fearing an ambush, refused to tackle the gunboat. So Beall was forced, reluctantly, to turn around and forsake the enterprise.

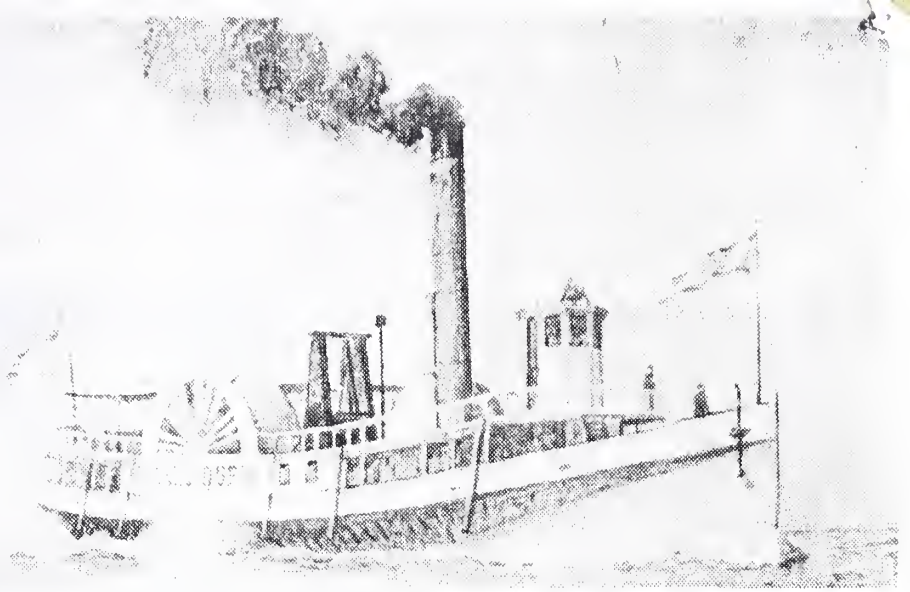
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**HE STEAMED** back to the Detroit River. Some of his men left the boat at Malden in a yawl that had been taken off the Island Queen. Beall put the crew of the Parsons ashore on Fighting Island.

The boat was then beached on the Canadian shore at Sandwich and the rest of the Confederates fled into Canada.

\* \* \*

**IT WAS WELL** for the Confederates that they had backed away from the Michigan. Capt. John C. Carter, commanding officer of the Michigan, was prepared for them. Cole had been unmasked as a rebel spy and put in irons.



Rebels seized and sank the "Island Queen"

## LOCAL INTELLIGENCE.

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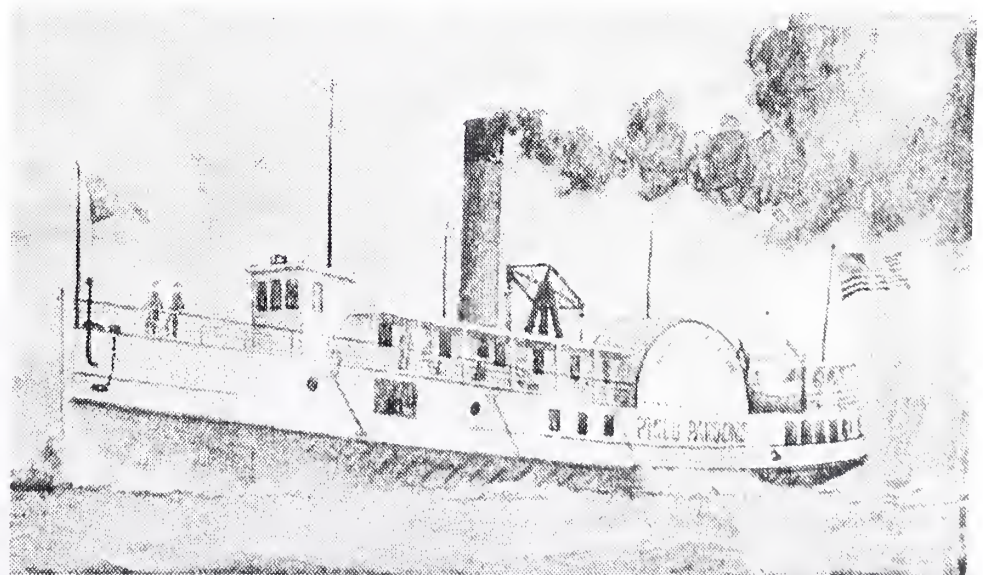
### REBEL RAID ON THE LAKES.

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### THE PHILO PARSONS CAPTURED.

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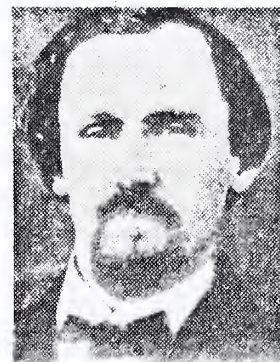
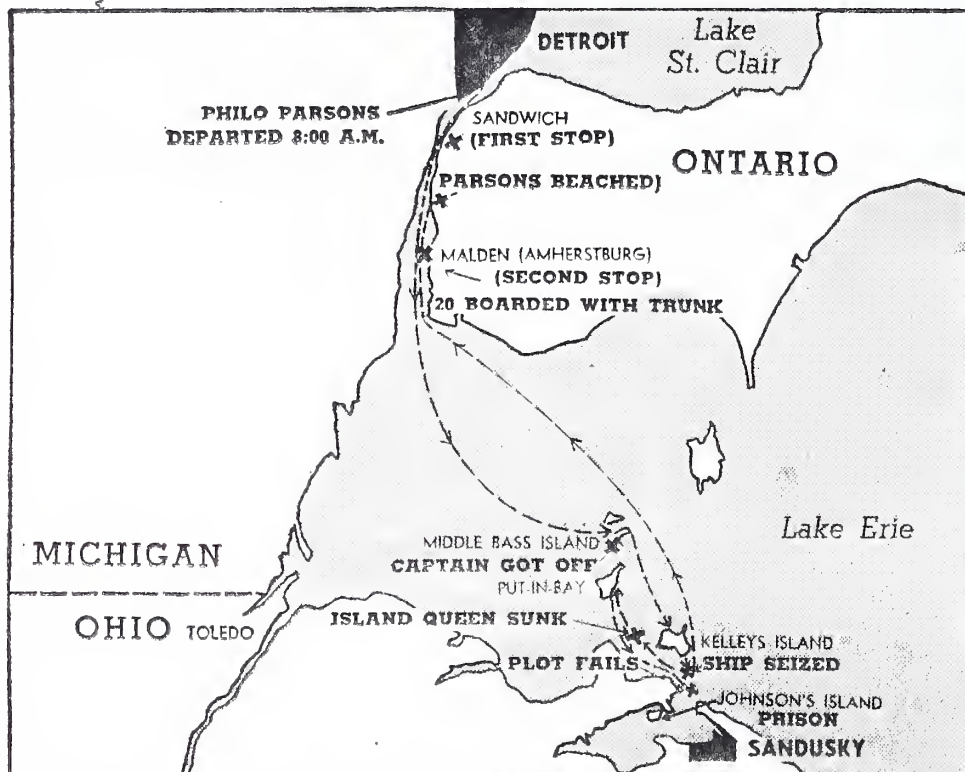
### THE ISLAND QUEEN SCUTTLED AND SUNK.



The "Philo Parsons" was the Rebel "flagship"

The story of the "Philo Parsons Incident" is the subject of an exhibit at the Detroit Historical Museum. Material for the exhibit was researched by C. Pat Labadie of the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle. He studied official records to authenticate details related by earlier historians, including Capt. Frank E. Hamilton of Kelleys Island, President Harlan

Hatcher of the University of Michigan and Great Lakes author Dana Thomas Bowen, and the files of The Detroit Free Press at the Burton Collection of the Detroit library. It's also based on a study by Dave Glick, president of the Detroit Marine Historical Society. The paintings are by Rev. Edward Dowling, S.J., Great Lakes Maritime Institute president.



Capt. John Beall

The "skipper" of the Confederate crew that seized the steamers Philo Parsons and Island Queen was a young Virginian. He was the only one of the raiders captured. Nabbed at Niagara Falls, he was tried and condemned to death. The above photo was taken only hours before he was hanged. Map at left shows development of the plot.

A telegram from B. H. Hill, acting provost marshal-general at Detroit, reveals that details of the plot had become well-known. He wired Capt. Carter about it the day of the raid.

Other accounts say the tip-off came from Washington, from London, from the Governor General of Canada, or from a traitor within the membership of the Johnson's Island Southern Cross.

COLE WAS quickly imprisoned on Johnson's Island. Influential friends later managed to secure his release.

All but one of the raiders on the Philo Parsons escaped through Canada either to Cuba or Bermuda and returned to the Confederacy.

The unlucky exception was Capt. Beall.

He was captured while attempting to cross back into the United States at Niagara Falls. He was tried, convicted and hanged on Governor's Island.

**THE REPERCUSSIONS** of the unsuccessful raid had the Great Lakes in a turmoil for days.

The raiders were feared still loose on the lakes. Residents of the Lake Erie islands hid their valuables in stumps and under lilac bushes and prepared to flee into the woods if the rebel "fleet" should appear.

The good people of North and Middle Bass islands met at Put-in-Bay to plan their defense.

They elected as their commander Capt. John Brown, Jr., son of the doughty abolitionist who led the Harpers Ferry raid. At his direction they wheeled the venerable Perry Victory cannon to a spot commanding the harbor and loaded it with scrap iron to repel invaders.

Cities around the lakes organized militia forces.

But Perry's cannon and all the militia would have been of little use against the guns of the Michigan or an army of 8,000 determined and battle-tested veterans under the command of the finest brains of the Confederacy.

It was a wild gamble, but the stakes were high when the tiny Confederate "navy" set sail.





# Lincoln Lore

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## The Embarrassing Case of Dr. Blanchard: A Newly Discovered Lincoln Document

In the midst of a toughly worded defense of his administration's use of arbitrary arrests to quell disloyalty in the North in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln was forced to admit that "instances of arresting innocent persons might occur." In fact, he said, they "are always likely to occur in such cases." Many more arrests fulfilled that prophecy than defenders of the administration liked to admit, but one of the most embarrassing cases has only recently come to light. In the summer of 1862 federal authorities arrested the brother-in-law of John A. Logan on the strength of completely erroneous testimony.

It would be difficult to think of a single person who, after the death of Stephen A. Douglas, played a more important role in rallying Illinois Democrats to enthusiastic support of the Northern war effort. As a lifelong resident of southern Illinois, "Egypt" as it was called, Logan symbolized the loyalty of the North's most southerly-located and -affiliated population. By the summer of 1862 he had been twice wounded in battle and carried the rank of brigadier general. He was among the best of the "political generals," militarily speaking, and he was among the most important, politically speaking. In the Lincoln administration's dark days of 1862, Logan was not a man the Republicans wanted to alienate.

Republicans ran the risk of alienating Logan as a result of a War Department order issued on August 8, 1862.

ORDERED — First. That all United States marshals, and superintendents and chiefs of police of any town, city, or district, be, and they are hereby, authorized and directed to arrest and imprison any person or persons who may be engaged, by any act of speech or writing, in discouraging volunteer enlistments, or in any way giving aid and comfort to the enemy, or any disloyal practice against the United States.

Second. That immediate report be made to Major L.C. Turner, judge advocate, in order that such persons may be tried before a military commission.

Third. That the expenses of such arrest and imprisonment will be certified to the chief clerk of the War Department for settlement and payment.

EDWIN M. STANTON,  
Secretary of War

Stanton said that he issued the order "by verbal direction of the President."

The effect of the order was to unleash hordes of local policemen and marshals who were made judges of precisely what sort of language, whether expressed in a barroom argument or a political stump speech, served to discourage enlistments. They made the arrests first and then sent the evidence to Judge Advocate Levi C. Turner, who then commented on the merits of the case. A hurrah for Jefferson Davis or a grumble about the administration's "abolition war" could and did send many a man to federal prison. Most of the persons arrested were never tried by military commission.

On August 24, 1862, David L. Phillips, the United States Marshal for the Southern District of Illinois, wrote Stanton from Springfield to inform him that he had arrested Dr. Israel Blanchard, of Murphysboro in Jackson County, Illinois, along with ten other Illinoisans and had forwarded them to Washington, D.C. There they wound up in the notorious Old Capital Prison, one of the places where the Lincoln administration incarcerated persons very frankly described as "prisoners of State" or "political prisoners."

Dr. Blanchard, born June 4, 1825, in Livingston County, New York, first practiced medicine in Erie County, New York, after graduating from the Botanic Medical College of Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1847. He left for California in 1850 but fell ill in Texas and remained there until 1852 when he moved to Jackson County, Illinois, settling in Carbondale. He practiced medicine there until 1860, when he moved to Murphysboro, 57 miles north of Cairo and 90 south-southwest of St. Louis, to study law. He was admitted to the bar in 1861.

The following summer Blanchard was arrested on the affidavit of a man who claimed that the doctor had attended a meeting of the Knights of the Golden Circle in Pinckneysville, Perry County, Illinois, on August 10, 1862, and there made



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. John A. Logan.



tion is quite a large one and perhaps too great in size to be searched thereafter for the one-volume *Supplement*.

Blanchard was discharged and returned to southern Illinois, where in 1863 he was elected state senator, on the Democratic ticket, of course.

The Blanchard episode is useful for more than showing that arbitrary arrests sometimes caused innocent men to suffer. The way the case has been treated in subsequent historical literature also serves to show some of the limitations of the works which have been critical of the Lincoln administration's policies.

Perhaps the most critical work and the one with perhaps the greatest influence is John A. Marshall's *American Bastille*, first published in Philadelphia in 1869 and republished numerous times thereafter. Many used book shops today offer testimony to the wide dissemination of this work, for Marshall's book is one of those most commonly found in the Civil War sections of such stores.

Marshall claimed to have been chosen Historian of the Association of State Prisoners at a convention of former prisoners of state in New York City. From all appearances, the book was based in part on testimony given Marshall by former prisoners.

There are details in Dr. Blanchard's account — about routes taken from one place of incarceration to another, for example — as it appears in *American Bastille* that would seem to indicate that Blanchard wrote or conversed with Marshall. But when checked against the original documents in the Turner-Baker Papers, the account of the case in Marshall's book is clearly riddled with errors.

Marshall stated that Blanchard, after his arrest in August 1862, was sent from Cairo to Marshal Phillips in Springfield, but

The marshal refused to receive him, and returned him under guard to General Prentiss at Cairo. He was then immediately liberated by the General and sent home, where he remained, continuing the practice of law until his second arrest.

In fact, the marshal sent Blanchard to the Old Capitol Prison and complimented the War Department on its wise policy.

There follows in Marshall's book an account of a second arrest of Blanchard in 1863 — an account which squares in some ways with the 1862 arrest documented in the Turner-Baker Papers. There is no mention of John A. Logan or of President Lincoln's recommendation to discharge Blanchard. By 1869, of course, Logan was a Republican, and a Radical Republican at that, and it may be that neither Blanchard nor Marshall wanted any mention of Logan's role in freeing his brother-in-law.

The most influential modern work on the subject has been done by Professor Frank Klement, whose *Copperheads in the Middle West*, *Limits of Dissent*, and numerous articles in scholarly journals are responsible for the modern view that the Knights of the Golden Circle were a sort of Republican chimera, at most a few shady characters and stumblebumps who posed no threat to the republic. Professor Klement is surely correct about the Knights, but his account of the Blanchard case, though based in part on research in the Turner-Baker Papers, is not very satisfactory either. *The Copperheads of the Middle West* states that the "net of an overly zealous federal marshal in southern Illinois produced nearly forty political prisoners" in a wave of arrests in August and September of 1862. In truth, there is evidence of 35 such arrests in the Turner-Baker Papers. In an earlier article on "Copperhead Secret Societies in Illinois during the Civil War," Klement said that the affidavits in the Illinois cases "failed to prove Phillips' contention that all whom he had arrested were 'leading and influential members of the Knights of the Golden Circle.'" Actually, Phillips never made such a claim. In the letter quoted earlier in this *Lincoln Lore*, for example, Phillips stated that eight of the eleven prisoners in the Blanchard group were K.G.C. members.

These are minor errors, of course, and ones which do not by any means undermine Klement's assertion that the Knights of the Golden Circle were a political will-o-the-wisp. But such things do have meaning. Excluding mention of Logan's role and Lincoln's, as Klement's account does, is perhaps a sign that Klement relied more heavily on Marshall's *American Bastille* than on the Turner-Baker Papers, and that, of course, would give a strong and unwarranted Democratic bias to his interpretation.

When Marshall failed to mention President Lincoln's role in

releasing Dr. Blanchard, it may have been because the doctor himself did not tell him about it. When Professor Klement followed suit, he had surely had the opportunity to see Logan's letter and Lincoln's endorsement himself. Klement's failure to mention it was a failure to introduce a piece of evidence useful to the other side, for one of the standard modern defenses of the Lincoln administration's record on civil liberties consists of pointing to those instances in which the president mitigated injustices caused by arbitrary arrests. Professor Kenneth Bernard, for example, writing on "Lincoln and Civil Liberties" in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* in 1951, said: "... while many arrests occurred which were in violation of this attitude of restraint [on Lincoln's part in using his war powers], such mistakes, especially if they came to Lincoln's attention, were usually quickly rectified. Indeed, it is amazing to note the rapidity with which most cases which reached Lincoln were considered and orders for release issued, even though Lincoln was constantly burdened with important problems of the war."

If a case like that of Dr. Israel Blanchard did not come to Lincoln's attention, then it is hard to imagine what kind of case did. Here was a grossly unjust arrest made on the strength of the flimsiest of affidavits. Affidavits and letters which directly refuted the allegation against the doctor poured into Washington. And the man arrested proved not only to be well connected but also to be related to a wounded general of great political importance to the Lincoln administration. Since John A. Logan intervened on Dr. Blanchard's behalf, there should be little wonder that Lincoln took notice.

The question of civil liberties in wartime occasionally raised tempers to the boiling point during the Civil War, and scholars ever since have found it difficult to avoid treating the subject with considerable passion. The vast Civil War literature has yet to produce an entirely believable account of the Lincoln administration's internal security measures, one which would in dispassionate manner, make clear the clash of passions and interests among the likes of Dr. Blanchard, Marshal Phillips, General Logan, and President Lincoln.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. Lincoln in 1862.





